

Film Reviews, 2001-2005

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Infinity (1996)

How to film a love affair, 3 January 2005

9/10

Take a real-life pair of lovers. Stay true to the specifics of their lives. Don't over-emphasize high points and low points for unrealistic dramatic effect. Let the story tell itself. In the mid-1930's, a brilliant young scientist fell in love with a girl from his neighborhood and began a relationship with her that lasted until her untimely death. They went on dates, he told her about his work, she opened up his mind to the arts, and they made love whenever and wherever possible. Here's another clue to filming a love affair: don't show the couple in the act of love accompanied by the pop hits of the day. Show us the prelude and the afterglow and save the gymnastics for the screenwriters with little imagination. Matthew Broderick shines as both star and director of this small film, and Patricia Arquette gave her best performance to date as his no-nonsense leading lady. The physics are a bit over my head but the romance is real and beautiful to watch.

A Christmas Without Snow (1980) (TV)

Ignore the official summary, 18 December 2004

8/10

**** This comment may contain spoilers ****

This is the story of a divorcée from Omaha, NE who moves alone to San Francisco (leaving her son with her mom back home) to start her life anew. She joins her new church's choir and falls in with an interesting group of singers of all races and ages. They are learning to perform Handel's "Messiah" under the direction of a no-nonsense old pro, played perfectly by John Houseman. The drama features goodly amounts of the choral work sung by cast members, in particular Miss Kim who possesses a lovely soprano voice. The cast also includes theater vets Ruth Nelson (as Learned's neighbor & longtime choir member) & Beah Richards (as Levels' grandma), along with James Cromwell as the pious preacher, Valerie Curtin as a busybody, & bearish fav Ramon Bieri as a clumsy romantic. I picked up a copy of this film on DVD for a buck today and tho' the film quality isn't perfect, the story involved is. It also serves as a kind of time capsule of a period in American history --the late 70's-- when anything seemed possible.

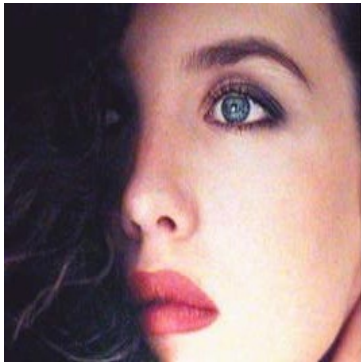
Vigil in the Night (1940)

Lombard was a great actress, period, 10 December 2004

7/10

Too many people commenting on this film about Carole Lombard not being funny in this movie. She proves in "Vigil in the Night" that she could deliver an impressive dramatic performance, and a good deal of it is without dialogue. This is not surprising since she started in the silent film era; it's also not surprising to anyone who saw her in "Made For Each Other" either. She was as fine an actress as Katharine Hepburn & Bette Davis; one can only wonder what other good performances she would have given had she survived the plane crash that took her in 1944.

Sharp-eyed viewers must also note the actress who plays Matron was brilliant as the pompous ornithologist in the cafe scene of "The Birds", twenty years after "Vigil" came out.



Isabelle Adjani

Camille Claudel (1988)

Passion and fury, 4 December 2004

8/10

If this account is any indication, Mademoiselle Claudel was a woman years ahead of her time. She is obstinantly obsessed with her art at all costs, despite her proper, upper-middle-class upbringing. She is played beautifully and passionately by Ms Adjani, who also produced this epic. With the exception of one major plot point which is never resolved (you'll have to read her Wikipedia bio for details), this is a fine portrait of artists in their element, surpassed only by "Girl With A Pearl Earring", where every scene is like a painting. I love the scene with her passed out in her loft surrounded by her meowing cats for instance, or the one where she is screaming at Rodin (Depardieu as the bastard artiste) while he cowers in his flat. She was a good and devoted

artist, as a portrait of her beloved brother Paul proves. Her depicted end is a bit abrupt for my tastes; perhaps if Adjani had portrayed her final years with more detail, she would have won the Oscar in '89. I can imagine her peers --like Streep & Lange-- watching this performance and learning, learning...

City by the Sea (2002)

Deja vu, 27 November 2004

7/10

Wasn't this script originally actually written in the 1930's, filmed by Warner Brothers or more likely RKO? Paul Muni as Vincent, Irene Dunne as Michelle, & John Garfield as Vincent's junkie son? No? Well, you could've fooled me. Back then, lame dialogue and lamer situations would somehow have seemed forgivable. The only thing "City By The Sea" has over those 30's potboilers is the presence of Frances McDormand, who is always a pleasure to see. It's been said that the reason she has never been top choice for leading lady in films is because she isn't "good-looking enough"; to me this is irrelevant. She has the emotional resonance of a Dunne or a Bergman and it's sad she had to waste it in this kind of junk. I guess she needed the money. Everybody else in the picture seems either embarrassed to be there or just waiting for the cash register to ring.

Cheaper by the Dozen (2003)

My remake of Cheaper by the Dozen (2003), 13 November 2004

6/10

Chop out most of the kids. Keep the oldest brother & sister, the tomboy sister in the frog hat, the fat kid, the put-upon redhead cruelly nicknamed "Fedex", and the fraternal twins. Retitle it something like "At Sixes & Sevens With You" and get an actor who is believably 45 years old, not ten years postdated. The oldest sister should be a combination of the two oldest girls in the current version: a high-school senior on the verge of adulthood who is dating a pretty-boy nitwit the rest of her siblings hate. The eldest brother should get to give his bullies a comeuppance; after all, he's a breathtakingly handsome & strapping young man who shouldn't have to take any abuse in the first place. The twins should be a boy and a girl under 7 and both as rowdy as the original two boys, but capable of acting like real kids without the phony sitcom one-liners. Keep the puke jokes, the scenes with the frog, & all of Forrest Landis' scenes because he really is the only interesting member

of the younger group of siblings. Then maybe this movie wouldn't be quite so useless a retread of a better-done-before classic.

Home Town Story (1951)

So what if it's propaganda? (spoiler), 6 November 2004

7/10

**** This comment may contain spoilers ****

It's a watchable little time-passer, like an episode of a TV show from the 60's. I liked it for its outdoor on-location shooting in the hills of California, Marilyn's silly early vocal inflections, Crisp's stirring reading of big biz theory, and the chance to see a 49 year-old actress play a 42 year-old actor's [i]mom[/i] as Brown does to Lynn. His annoying kid sister --who is young enough to be his granddaughter-- has a Bad Thing happen to her in the last half, complete with a pray-it-happens near-death experience. Alan Hale Jr is the B-movie Jack Carson here, large economy-sized wry sidekick to the hero, and Marjorie Reynolds is stalwart as Lynn's long-waiting bride. She looks quite a bit like Ellen Burstyn here, which made watching her more interesting.

The Journey (1959)

Bold for its day, 25 October 2004

8/10

Very literate, intelligent drama about a group of international travelers held virtual prisoners in the Hungary of 1956 by invading Russian Communist regime. Kerr and Robards play lovers, she a British baroness, he a Hungarian freedom fighter trying to do his bit for his country. Other New York theater stars of the period Anne Jackson & E G Marshall play an American couple traveling with their two young sons, including Ronny Howard in his screen debut. Jackson's character is hugely pregnant and not anxious to give birth in a soon-to-be communist country; she gives an impassioned plea in the third act of this film which presages the naturalistic acting styles we've come to know today from Redgrave, Fonda, & Streep. Leading the pack of Soviet wolves is Yul Brynner, magnificent as a commandant and at his sexiest since he played opposite Kerr in "The King and I". He is mean and nasty and terribly conflicted by his attraction to the lovely, patrician, & heroic Kerr. This is one of the great transition films of the latter part of the Golden Era of American film. Do not miss it.



Diane Keaton

Something's Gotta Give (2003)

A rare hit picture for the grownups (spoilers), 24 October 2004
9/10

**** This comment may contain spoilers ****

I can't believe Fox didn't want to do this flick because the stars were "too old"! I mean here you have the perfect vehicle for Nicholson & Keaton who were so romantic together for their few minutes together as star-crossed real-life lovers Eugene O'Neill and Louise Bryant in the great "Reds". Nancy Meyers wrote the script with these two pros in mind and they do it justice with the able help of Frannie McDormand in support. Jack's a salaciously aging ladies' man dating a much younger woman (Peet) who turns out to be the daughter of a famous lady playwright (Keaton). Gradually the two adults fall in love and the daughter wisely bows out to enable her mom to have some happiness in her life for a change. The romance is rocky and complicated by the attentions of Jack's young doc (Reeves) who is smitten with Keaton. I love this Phillip Barry style script Meyers has produced, complete with a play within a play that her heroine is in the process of writing with much agony! Brilliant work.



Elizabeth Pena

Suburban Madness (2004) (TV)

Real men shiver as Eve puts them in their place, 3 October 2004
8/10

Or rather Clara. Pena stars as real-life Houston dentist Clara Harris who murdered her husband so memorably a couple of years ago -- caught on videotape -- by running his adulterous pig self over three or four times with her Mercedes in the parking lot of the hotel of his latest tryst with his mistress. Ward is the sassy PI who has become entangled in a web of cheats which led her to this fateful day. Cullen is the dirtbag husband, a tall, handsome & hunky yet perennial loser who gets his just desserts in notably graphic fashion. The film is a better-than-average TV movie with more than a few nods to "American Beauty" in its art direction and set up of this seemingly idyllic suburban paradise where filth creeps just below the surface. The church scenes are especially dripping in sanctimonious venom as these hypocrites in sheep's clothing go about their lives.

Epicenter (2000)

"Fun Junk", 4 September 2004
7/10

With its largely no-name (to me at least) cast, I expected this to be a drag but it held my attention to the very end. Easily Lords at her least sexy, her plain face & toned-down figure so pronounced here it's a wonder she ever made it in the adult film business. She's not a bad actress though and I gotta hand it to her for playing her character -- a dogged FBI undercover agent trying to break up an espionage ring -- totally straight. I could have done without the subplot with the kid, I

just didn't buy it at all. There's not enough of Jeff Fahey here (I would have made him her bf and dropped the kid story altogether) and Gary Daniels only has one fight scene where he gets to show off his kickboxing talents. But the special effects (almost better than those in "Earthquake") and one fabulous chase scene involving a trolley car and a vintage Chrysler convertible down the hilly streets of San Francisco make it worth the rental.

Bruce Almighty (2003)

Surprisingly inoffensive & good, 28 August 2004

9/10

I've never been a big fan of Jim Carrey in the movies. He was great on "In Living Color" but his big-screen persona was tediously over-the-top until he starred in the calmer "The Truman Show" and "The Majestic", the latter performance especially good & sincere. He's sincerely believable as the title character in this film as well, a smartass spot reporter who hasn't a clue how to love his lovely girlfriend, played by Aniston. Then, when he hits rock bottom, an emotional conversation with God sets him on the path to, well, righteousness. I can't think of a better person to play the Man than the one chose, Mr Freeman, unless they went female and chose Dame Judi Dench. Why this fine actor has never won an Oscar is beyond me; he plays the Deity strong and all-knowing, all-seeing, but with a dry sense of humor. Indeed, one of the reasons I initially avoided watching this film was for any blasphemous content: Jim Carrey becoming divine?? Yikes! I really liked this guy Bruce as well as his lady, Grace. It's so rare to see a white Christian in pictures these days who is young and not wearing a habit. She's such a good and loving person you really feel for her when she is inevitably --the signs come early in the film-- betrayed.

High Sierra (1941)

What a bummer!, 16 July 2004

3/10

I've wanted to see this for years and finally got a chance to tonight (thank God for Turner Classics!), only to be sorely disappointed. Although there are some early scenes of interest involving Arthur Kennedy, Cornel Wilde, & Alan Curtis as gotta-be-gay young thugs, the story soon goes off a deep end of unbelievable plotting involving two younger women. Bogey seems uncomfortable in the role & should have let George Raft keep the project. Ida Lupino's hairstyle really irritated

me; I kept thinking of Carol Burnett's great Eunice character every time Lupino was on camera & waiting for her to utter the kind of snappily bitter line of dialogue Burnett made famous years later, but no such luck. She's a complete, simpering drag here, one of many elements which pull the production down into nothingness. Joan Leslie is the picture of lovely vapidness; considering the later girls in Bogie's onscreen love life, she's got to be the least. Oh, and that horrible black stereotype Algernon (played by Willie Best) is just vile, even for the period; contrast him with that virile member of Bogie's gang in the superior "Petrified Forest" just a few years before. I kept waiting for the gang from Mystery Science Theater to sit down in the front row and rag on the action: yes, it's that bad. Bogie's sleep-talking scene is one of the lowest points in his career on film, just begging for satire.



Kyra Sedgewick

Personal Velocity: Three Portraits (2002)

Self-important trilogy with a few good performances, 19 June 2004
7/10

Biggest bummer in here was Kyra Sedgewick's thankless role as an utterly repulsive abused wife/tramp; I couldn't wait for her story to end. Best performance comes from Fairuza Balk as a young woman dealing with sudden offscreen tragedy and coming to a lovely realization about herself by story's end.

Indie queen Parker Posey's performance is somewhere in the middle as a tough editor who is married to The Sweetest Guy On Earth (Tim Guinee) and who doesn't appreciate all that she's got. She has her mother's sensitivity and her vile father (played by stage veteran Ron Leibman)'s brashness & sexual obsessions. Her scenes in the bathroom and with the plum assignment of her career are some of several unexpected sights in

this trilogy by Rebecca Miller. She reminds me a little of Carole Lombard and Ellen Barkin in their peak years, that same kind of wreckless slatternliness from an otherwise smart cookie.

Best performance from the males in the picture comes from Lou Pucci as a runaway boy Balk's character picks up on the road. He conveys such overwhelming sadness with subtle looks and body language, such as when eating a donut. Something horrible has put him on the run and we're never really quite sure what it is.

Cross Creek (1983)

Nothin' like a hard-headed woman, 24 April 2004
9/10

I've done some studying of the life of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, which I think should be mandatory for any transplantee to Florida. I have lived in this beautiful state for nearly 40 years and have been blessed to do so in an area that once was as rural as the Cross Creek (located up near Ocala) depicted in this fine American classic. Rawlings was a tough lady with an exquisite eye for detail and once she learned to write about what she knew firsthand (a must for any writer), she opened up a whole new world to people. This film depicts her early days in the serene swamp she (Steenburgen) adopted as her home, and the self-examination one has to do to get to where they need to get in order to write effectively. Along the way, she makes friends with a colorful array of backwoods folks, including Rip Torn's brill interpretation of Marsh Turner and Alfre Woodard's awkwardly sincere Geechee. Ironically, the real Geechee was taller & plainer than the pretty Ms Woodard, but she gets the heart of the character down perfectly. I love the presentation of Tim & his young wife, the couple Rawlings based her first important short story -- "Jacob's Ladder"-- on; Hammond & Hudson are young, raw, & real in their brief yet necessary appearance. I wish that they had filmed JL at the same time with these two actors, it's such a great story.

Trapped (2002)

Contrived certainly, but worth the rent, 3 April 2004
7/10

Lots of little gaps in logic for this film, but watch it for the acting. Theron is such a mesmerizing presence it's worth catching to watch her growth as an actress; she conveys a sense of disgust that she must have pulled from personal experience. Fanning is very believable as her brave

& bright kidnapped daughter, a little doll of a player for whom one must cross their fingers in hopes that she graduates into Jodie Foster's realm. Bacon's a bit camp as the over-the-top villain: he is utterly despicable in virtually every scene he plays. Love will inspire snickers not for her acting but for drug references that are clearly familiar territory in her offscreen life; it's still hard to tell if her talent is due to nature, training, or just expert editing. And what editing! The action scenes are amazing in their complexity.

A Mighty Wind (2003)

Sweet-natured satire, 13 March 2004

8/10

This isn't as brilliant as "Best In Show", Christopher Guest's previous film with the same group of players, but it's worth seeing for the trademark dry humor and songs that aren't that bad. Okay, they're not that good either, except for the Oscar-nominated "A Kiss At The End Of The Rainbow"--which is catchy enough to chart-- written by Annette O'Toole (who unfortunately doesn't appear in the film) and Michael McKean (who fortunately does, as one of the clueless Folksmen) and is featured in the film's high point at a reunion concert. Jane Lynch is hilarious as an ex-adult film star turned Anita Bryant-clone whose bizarro self-actualization raises eyebrows from fellow 'New Mainstreet Singers'. Eugene Levy is sweet stoner folkie Mitch on a permanent trip of pure love and awe, while Catherine O'Hara plays his former flame & bandmate Mickey as wonderfully centered and unpretentious. I hope Mary Travers & other women of folk music such as O'Hara's real-life sister Mary Margaret who inspired this role took it as a compliment. Kind of drags in places via blowhard characters played by Balaban & Willard but the out-of-leftfield ending is too funny!

Flight of Black Angel (1991) (TV)

Worth a look, 28 February 2004

7/10

A good example of storytelling without using big stars and boffo special effects to put a point across. Mentally-disturbed young Air Force pilot takes it upon himself to destroy humanity--or as much of it as he can--on a mission from God. Manages to be gripping and scary particularly in the flying sequences and when he takes a young family hostage. Slow-going for some to be sure but real tension exists in his scenes with the wife, played believably by future Tony-winner Pawk, as

he prepares for his "mission". This villain is a sad and methodical victim of his own madness. Strauss--a rather limited player--is appropriately stalwart and the voice of reason as his commanding officer, tho I couldn't help but think of Robert Stack in "Airplane!" trying to help the saner Robert Hays come in for a landing.

Iron Jawed Angels (2004) (TV)

Required viewing for any woman who votes (or wants to), 21 February 2004

I had seen the great "American Experience" documentary that PBS had done on Women's Suffrage several years ago and was surprised that no one in Hollywood laid a hand on this true story of these great American heroines. Now, at last (if not perfect), there is a decent dramatization of this important period in US history. It was nice to see early on Adilah Barnes' character demanding that black women get to march in the landmark parade led by luminous Julia Ormond as classy-but-tough Inez Milholland; unfortunately, she kind of disappears after the first reel. Swank's (boring) relationship with Patrick Dempsey as a Post cartoonist also threatens to drag the production down and out of focus. The film doesn't really pick up steam until the last half, with O'Connor leading the way as plucky Lucy Burns and Parker as the do-gooder wife of a wimpy Democratic senator. Swank's Alice Paul is smart, strong-willed, and surprisingly girlish; Ms Paul in real life was rather plain & unassuming and it's nice to see her as a whole person, tho I could have done without the bathtub scene...and that wildly-inappropriate rock score. There was plenty of rousing ragtime, Tin-pan Alley, and jazz music back in the day that they could have used for greater effect & accuracy.



Sutherland and Fonda

Klute (1971)

Creepy, defining classic of the 70's, 15 February 2004

9/10

Accented throughout by the late Michael Small's unsettling

piano-&-stoned-soprano soundtrack, "Klute" is one of the defining films of the 1970's. Fonda plays an NYC call girl named Bree Daniels attempting to break free from her sordid past who is being stalked by an ex-john into S&M sex. Sutherland is her hero John Klute, a very decent guy from Pennsylvania who works as a private investigator looking for a missing man who may have been this very client. Naturally, they fall in love, but it is an often brutal experience emotionally because Bree is a cold-hearted tart who has been in the business so long she is incapable of having an orgasm. Jane is phenomenal throughout, including her sessions with a psychiatrist (which have the feel of pure improv) and auditioning for a play (I thought she was pretty good) and Sutherland lends solid support, even if his face remains pretty much poker.

Swept Away (2002)

Actually...not that bad, 1 February 2004

7/10

Adriano Giannini is the main reason to see this film. He is definitely his father's son, a strapping hunk of beefcake with real screen presence. Unfortunately, I've never seen his father's original performance so I can't compare the two but this flick worked for me as watchable entertainment. I also admit to being a fan of Madonna...s music; her acting has improved quite a bit over the years and she was sufficiently compelling by picture's end. And who did not get a kick out of seeing her being slapped around comeuppance-wise? She plays [i]such[/i] a bitch in this picture!! The only scene which disturbed me was a sexual advance made upon her which was filmed a bit too erotically. Her husband Guy Ritchie does prove to be a decent director; this isn't like Rita Tushingham's "comeback" a few years ago under the helm of her talentless director hubby. The setting is primarily an abandoned Greek island so rustically beautiful that "Swept Away" doubles as a lovely travelogue.

Unfaithful (2002)

Don't just see this for Diane Lane (possible spoiler), 17 January 2004

7/10

**** This comment may contain spoilers ****

Lane earned her Oscar nod in this film in a very believable role as a bored housewife who falls hard for a sexy younger man, but Richard Gere is just as good in one of his most subdued & intelligent performances

ever. I generally don't like him in movies because he tends to ham it up but here he plays a nice guy for a change--with Martinez in the kind of role he used to play at that age--who is genuinely and deeply affected by his wife's betrayal. They have a lovable young son together and he is lax to lose this seemingly perfect family. However, the plot twist involving his meeting with the lover is just not very believable and goes way too far, particularly the elevator & car-trunk scenes. I did like the ending though, very thoughtful & tender. I think this is the real reason Gere won his Golden Globe, not merely for "Chicago".

Mary Cassatt: An American Impressionist (1999) (TV)

Great American painter deserves better writing, 31 December 2003
7/10

Amy Brenneman does her best with a weak script concerning a few months in Mary Cassatt's life in Paris of 1887. Loaded with late 20th Century-style dialogue, such as a girl yearning independence by "having it all", it is aimed solely at latter-day teenaged girls without a hint of the period's necessary history. The costumes & sets are lovely, and the recreations of some of Cassatt's early classic works are interesting, if again historically inaccurate: according to Mark Harden's Artchive, the little girl on the blue chair was the daughter of a friend of Degas', not Miss Cassatt's niece.

Adaptation. (2002)

Streep & Cooper only reason to watch, 21 December 2003
6/10

Every time that the story sticks to the relationship between Chris Cooper's brilliant but skanky orchid thief and Meryl Streep's avid New Yorker scribe Susan Orlean, "Adaptation" works beautifully. Every time it goes back to Nic Cage's character(s), it sinks like a stone. Cage is pure irritant as neurotic real-life screenwriter Charlie Kaufmann: yak yak yak in every scene. The plot device works a charm in the first half hour or so but soon flogs a dead horse to crumbles in much the same way Tim Conway delivers his own pathetic brand of comedy. Best way to watch this flick is with a fast-forward button: whenever Cage's ugly mug is alone on camera, advance to anything with Meryl (genetically-wired to always be good), Cooper, luminous Tilda Swinton, & the two other ladies featured in the cast. Kudos also to the editors for a couple of unexpected bits of violence & eroticism.

The Contaminated Man (2000)

Fairly gripping contemporary thriller, 20 December 2003

7/10

William Hurt may not be an American matinee idol anymore, but he still has pretty good taste in B-movie projects. Here, he plays a specialist in hazardous waste clean-ups with a tragic past tracking down a perennial loser on the run --played by former pretty-boy Weller-- who has been contaminated with a deadly poison. Current pretty-boy Hardy Kruger Jr --possibly more handsome than his dad-- is featured as Weller's arrogant boss in a horrifying sequence at a chemical production plant which gets the story moving. Natasha McElhone is a slightly wacky government agent looking into the incident who provides inevitable & high-cheekboned love interest for hero Hurt. Michael Brandon pops up to play a slimy take-no-prisoners type whose comeuppance you can't wait for. The Coca-Cola company wins the Product Placement award for 2000 as the soft drink is featured throughout the production, shot lovingly on location in a wintery picture-postcard Hungary.

Wendigo (2001)

Not a masterpiece but suitably creepy, 13 December 2003

7/10

NYC family of three travels upstate to stay at rustic farmhouse for the weekend. An ugly incident occurs involving the local peasantry. The parents recover enough to have a very sexy love scene and that's the last bit of pleasantness for the rest of the picture. The focus is then on their young son Miles who has a passion for mystical Native American lore; he acquires a talisman called a Wendigo and it serves as a kind of protector for him. More shocking (yet subtle, in the quick-cut style of "The Ring") violence occurs followed by a sharp twist & then it's over. I found the critter rather hokey on full view but everything else works pretty well & will give you the creeps if you relax your hold on reality for a couple of hours.

A Child's Cry for Help (1994) (TV)

Mindy plays a meanie, 29 November 2003

Pam Dawber shows off her versatility in this change-of-pace role as a woman who exploits her son's illness for her own self-aggrandizement. I usually skip the treacley based-on-fact movies made for Lifetime cable channel, but this turned out to be fairly gripping material. Veronica

Hamel is strong & beautiful as a doctor dedicated to exposing this sociopathic fraud, though I could have done without the subplot concerning her rocky home-life.

The Paradine Case (1947)

Poison the barrister's wife!, 16 November 2003

7/10

Tense courtroom drama almost defeated by the tedious ramblings of a jealous wife, played by Ann Todd. Peck & Valli -- playing lawyer and client in a high society murder case -- are as beautiful a (should-be) couple as Cary Grant & Ingrid Bergman were in Hitchcock's much more impressive "Notorious". Jourdan also impresses greatly in his debut as the black widow's late husband's handsome valet. Todd is given only one good line, after an extra-creepy encounter with the always creepy Laughton. Tetzl (reminiscent of Kathleen Quinlan), as Coburn's sharp-witted daughter, would have made a much better wife for Peck's character, younger and certainly more fun than the insufferably fufu Todd.

Ghost Ship (2002)

Tough call but..., 10 November 2003

7/10

I would have to recommend this flick. Great idea, terrible script, fantastic special effects/art direction/& editing, wasted cast, & one truly excellent final scene: such a dichotomy! What they really should have done was chop it down to about an hour (excluding virtually every line uttered by the embarrassing Latino stereotype called Santos for starters) and present it as one of those "Outer Limits" episodes on cable. It would then be a thrill ride from start to finish. Otherwise, it drags where it should accelerate. Rent it on DVD and fast forward thru the static parts.

Lilies of the Field (1963)

1 out of 1 people found the following comment useful :-

What a good Christian movie should be, 12 October 2003

8/10

No bells & whistles, shot in symbolic black & white on a tight budget, "Lilies of the Field" tells a good story of faith versus all kinds of adversity. A group of East German nuns have travelled 8000 miles to settle in an abandoned Arizona farmhouse, with one dream: to build a

chapel for their local congregation. Into their lives comes a strapping young man (Sidney Poitier) with literally nothing better to do than help them achieve their goal. The sisters, led by Lilia Skala as the stern Mother Superior, consider him a gift of divine intervention whereas Homer Smith is in need of serious direction in his life. Poitier overacts in a few scenes -- a little too jolly and smartass at times -- but the strength of the whole film keeps your attention.

The Mean Season (1985)

Tight little thriller shot on location, 1 September 2003

8/10

One of the early serial killer flicks and it still packs a punch. Kurt Russell's Malcolm Anderson reminds me a lot of Darrin McGavin's Kolchak, the skeptical paranormal investigator from TV's "The Night Stalker", from their lousy taste in clothes to their hardheaded devotion to the truth as journalists. Kolchak stalked freaks & creeps and Anderson gets the experience in reverse, seriously wreaking havoc on his off-work romance with girlfriend Christine (Mariel Hemingway), a schoolteacher with strong values. Richard Jordan is suitably creepy in one of his last roles--really a variation on the local corporate slimeball he played in another made-in-FL minor classic, "A Flash Of Green"--as the killer. Andy Garcia is also quite likeable in the role he's best at: solid support work as a police detective pal of Russell's journalist who inadvertently gets as much press as the glory-seeking villain. I've seen this picture several times and never tire of it. It's in that class of films with "Night Moves", "Flash of Green", maybe "House of Games" and "Blood & Wine": tough-guy thrillers with smart writing and heroes to boot.



Anjelica Huston

Blood Work (2002)

A mystery so lame, Nancy Drew would nab the killer in the first reel,
17 August 2003
3/10

Man, this is weak! Solid cast of familiar faces apparently strapped for cash (Huston & Daniels: shame on you!) flounders with a script so bad and predictable, it almost plays like a dry satire on movie mysteries. Eastwood's character is supposed to be a master criminal profiler for the FBI but cannot put two & two together until way too late. The original concept is a good one but the finished result is an embarrassing waste of talent.

Death to Smoochy (2002)

Less fuschia than coal black, 13 July 2003
7/10

This wicked trashing of children's television tanked at the box office but may well become a cult classic thanks to the crisply sardonic script by Adam Resnick and the acting of two top-drawer players, Ed Norton & Catherine Keener. Norton is a goody-two-shoes kiddy entertainer, Keener a coldhearted witch of a producer at KidVid, the Nickelodeon knock-off of this film. Robin Williams almost --but not quite-- goes over the top as a sleazeball former star whose timeslot Norton's sickeningly-sweet plush rhino character (Smoochy: think Barney with an acoustic guitar) has taken over. He's obsessed with destroying this decent guy's life & career in a variety of despicable ways. Pam Ferris, who stole the show from director Danny Devito in another minor classic he directed, "Matilda", gives great support as a tough & foul-mouthed Irish mob leader whose brain-dead (but lovable) ex-boxer brother Spinner (Michael Rispoli) becomes a part of the Smoochy show. Absolutely not for children, but definitely for their parents, particularly those sick of those ooey-gooley kiddie-show hosts they know are full of beans.

Frailty (2001)

Simultaneously makes me want to laugh & shiver, 1 July 2003

I've always been able to trust Bill Paxton for quality work. He tends to go places most actors won't go, at least not since the early 70's heyday of Jack Nicholson. "Frailty" plays like a combination of Mimi Rogers' best role in "The Rapture" and director Kathryn Bigelow's magnificent vampire tale "Near Dark". Paxton was featured in the latter film as an over-the-top bloodsucker. In "Frailty", he is as low-key and benign as

fellow rural-dweller John Walton, except that one day John-Boy's daddy never went completely off his nut and started having 'visions' of 'demons'. Unlike "The Rapture"--which was encased in a lucite shell of sincerity--"Frailty" occasionally slides quite near to the satirical, but I had to take it as coal-black humor of the "Dead Like Me" variety. The boy who plays his defiant older son, Fenton, is also quite good. Not a masterpiece by any means--reminds me quite a bit of the old DC Comics horror series of the 70's--but worth catching.



Bogie and Bacall

Dark Passage (1947)

More slate than noir, 22 June 2003

8/10

Perhaps the least of the four films Bogie & Bacall made together, "Dark Passage" is still a must-see for fans of the noir genre. Actually, more slate than noir, i.e., more gray areas than the coal black of other Bogart classics like "Maltese Falcon" & "The Big Sleep". He plays a prison escapee who was framed for murdering his wife & is supported by a young lady bountiful (Bacall) who believes in his innocence. Agnes Moorehead goes above and beyond in the evil woman department; she is as unrelenting as a crow at fresh roadkill. Even Clifton Young, looking like a cross between Richard Widmark & Tim Robbins, is appropriately smarmy as a young punk with a grudge; a pity he died so young in real life. Only Bruce Bennett fails to register, even more wooden here than he was in the same year's "Mildred Pierce". The film is like a car wreck you can't help but investigating for yourself.



Laura Linney

The Mothman Prophecies (2002)

The X-Files flick that should have been, 19 April 2003

8/10

Beautifully photographed and edited thriller which plays out like an extended "X-Files" episode. Richard Gere playing a Washington Post reporter makes a rather dim Fox Mulder clone, but Laura Linney's worried small-town cop outclasses him in the Dana Sculley role. The premise is no more far-fetched than the unrelated series offered in its best episodes, namely the monster ones (as opposed to those tedious alien stories): very creepy with only a few well-timed creature features.

Debra Messing (earning the Sela Ward Underused TV Beauty award--see "The Fugitive" for details) fans are advised not to miss the first reel. Alan Bates has a couple of scenes as a reclusive American writer who has experience the Mothman Prophecies firsthand. Will Patton continues his quest for typecast weirdos. All in all, a good time-killer with a bang-up ending for those willing to suspend belief for two hours.

Out of the Ashes (2003) (TV)

The real Sophie's Choice, 13 April 2003

8/10

Christine Lahti adds another compelling performance to her resume as the real-life doctor Gisella Perl, a Jewish Hungarian doctor imprisoned in Auschwitz in 1944. She is the primary reason to see this film, which also features Richard Crenna in his final film role, as well as character pros Beau Bridges & Bruce Davison as rather smug Immigration officers in the New York of 1947. Perl had emigrated to the US to resume

her practice and despite her technical qualifications, had to run a gamut of accusations from Immigration regarding her activities and perceived collaboration with the Nazis at the infamous death camp. Like "Sophie's Choice", the fictional story of Holocaust survival which won Meryl Streep at much-deserved Oscar, "Ashes" makes great use of flashbacks and thick Eastern European accents for realism. The actor playing the mass-murderer Dr. Mengele is particularly chilling in his matter-of-fact way of choosing who should live and who should die, or worse, undergo the scientific quackery of his "experiments". Lahti is just perfect in the role, and the scene of her prayer to her father late in the film is especially moving.

From Hell (2001)

Discrete horror film, 22 March 2003

8/10

I appreciate a horror flick that doesn't dwell on the gore & grue. Depp adds another strong characterization to his scrapbook; I just wish that the Oscar people would sit up and take notice of this underrated talent. He holds his own up against Sir Holm, P.I. to MD, each equally dedicated and touched by their situations. Graham is very good here and manages to convey sex appeal merely by heaving her cleavage, not exposing it. In fact there is little in the way of graphic gore, only nightmare flashes. I also liked the (rather far-out) explanation of whodunit. Gorgeous recreation of Victorian London to boot.

Monster's Ball (2001)

Slow-going bummer, 15 March 2003

6/10

This film plays out like a high-art porno with a series of explicit sex-scenes punctuated by harsh comments and actions from some of the most hateful people in movie history.

Berry's performance doesn't hold a candle to Tilda Swinton's in the same year's "The Deep End" and yet she somehow managed a Best Actress award for a role that was essentially in support when Swinton (onscreen 90 %) didn't even rate a nomination. Berry isn't terrible but her performance truly isn't much better than the average woman-in-peril in a Lifetime flick. Thornton, on the other hand, completely carries the picture. He really is the only reason to see it, altho a shocking early scene featuring Ledger as his son and a humorous later one involving his vile

father (Boyle) parenthesise the story to good effect. The leads are simply two pathetic people drawn together by convoluted tragedies.

All Over the Guy (2001)

Witty romantic comedy, 8 February 2003

9/10

One of the better gay-themed romantic comedies of recent years and hip enough to make fun of bigger-budget attempts to appease the gay market, like "In & Out" (which I also love). The main cast is largely unknown to me by name, tho' I've seen the four leads in various quality TV and indie films before. They're supported by first-rate players like Doris Roberts as a wise clinic receptionist, Christina Ricci as the hero's sassy kid sister, and, in a bit which recalls her ditsy waitress on "Mad About You", Lisa Kudrow as a dim-witted actress. Lots of great one-liners and a realistically played-out rocky romance between the two young men, each with unhappy upbringings and their respective moms played by vets Andrea Martin & Joanna Kerns. Even the soundtrack works without being too intrusive, featuring stars like Matthew Sweet & Lyle Lovett.

My Louisiana Sky (2001) (TV)

Pleasant family fare with a twist, 30 January 2003

7/10

Well-made if rather familiar plot (think of better films like "Eve's Bayou", "Member of the Wedding", & "The Man In The Moon") about a homely-but-bright adolescent girl (Keel) living in a sleepy southern town of the mid-1950's. Knight, who was once as slim and curvy as Lewis (see "Petulia"), makes a lovable grandma to this kid and the ever-underrated Lewis a lively aunt. Robinson adds a sort of cliched warmth as housekeeper Magnolia, though she has a few good scenes keeping Miss Tiger Ann in line. Lewis (previously wimpy and weaselly on the "X-Files") is charming as Keel's stuttering yet stalwart father. Little happens in the plot outside of an inevitable family tragedy & a lot of rain but it makes for easy viewing on a slow news day.

Backdraft (1991)

Pure entertainment value, 4 January 2003

8/10

The special effects are superb, both visual & audio (right down to the

clanking gates in the prison Sutherland's psycho arsonist is holed up in), which is the main reason to see this film. Secondary is the volatile yet loving relationship between the fire-fighter brothers played by Baldwin and Russell. Toss in a standard plot about another psycho arsonist terrorizing Chicago & a couple of sexy love scenes between these heros and their leading ladies (Leigh & the underused DeMornay respectively) and you have a good no-brainer slab of entertainment to pass the time with.

Another good reason to watch this film: those high-quality firefighting scenes will remind you of the hell the NYFD went through at the World Trade Center on 9/11. Never forget.



Audrey Hepburn

Love Among Thieves (1987) (TV)

Not classic Audrey by any means but..., 3 January 2003
7/10

Certainly worth watching for the cast alone. Hepburn and a bearish Robert Wagner spend much of their time sniping wickedly at each other in this otherwise standard stolen goods adventure. It is sometimes funny, occasionally offbeat (the bandit's ball is a very bizarre trip), and offers a few tiny surprises along the way. Also interesting to see Jerry Orbach, best known as smartass detective Lenny Briscoe on NBC's "Law & Order", playing a rotten creep on Audrey's trail. Only problem I had with the film is the hideous red & white polka-dotted dress Aud' wears in the first half of the film, made up for somewhat by two gorgeous Givenchy gowns elsewhere in the production. There's also featured a fabulous villain's mansion hidden away in the Latin-American desert at which I wouldn't mind vacationing!

"Taken" (2002) (mini)

Ten hours of unrelenting ugliness, 15 December 2002

2/10

Whatever happened to the Steven Spielberg of such wonderments "Close Encounters" & "E.T."? What events so twisted him into producing dreck like this miniseries, done in by bad writing, a less-than-stellar cast, & more callous depictions of pure evil than Chris Carter could ever have come up with in a season of "X-Files" offshoots. I went into this expecting great things and very shortly came away from it with feelings of dread and sorrow, not the kind of entertainment one expects the first two weeks of December. Absolutely the only draw for this show is Dakota Fanning as the fated heroine Allison. She's a great actress, comparable to Jodie Foster at that age (8), far outpacing movie-mom Emily Bergl and arch-villainess Heather O'Donoghue, altho the latter has a few good low-camp moments opposite Matt Frewer's brill wacko scientist. I'd even go so far as to compare Fanning to a young Bette Davis, she's that good with her emotional responses.

The whole sordid affair smacks of series pilot, and don't be surprised to see either a sequel or a full-blown series by the end of 2003. I only pray that Miss Fanning's parents have enough foresight to get their kid over to the London School of Dramatic Arts and start her studying Shakespeare before signing on to any more episodes of this career-killing exercise in sci-fi-by-numbers.

Miss Lettie and Me (2002) (TV)

Disappointing family fare, 8 December 2002

3/10

I usually know how good or bad a picture is within the first fifteen minutes and this return of Mary Tyler Moore to the small screen was no exception. The tip off? The little girl playing her niece Travis. I say 'little girl' as opposed to 'actress' because if this child's abrasive, one-dimensional performance is any indication, the wonderful Dakota Fanning ("I Am Sam", "Taken") will have nothing to worry about come her next casting call.

In fact, the only actor who gives a really decent performance here is Irma P. Hall as Charlie Robinson's mother, Miss Rose. She is warm and all-knowing, and having worked for ice queen Lettie Anderson's family

for 75 years, she knows a lot of family secrets. Nothing too profound, mind you -- did I mention that Dalene Young's script is incredibly boring? I kept waiting for Lettie to really lose her cool and smack that snotty kid upside the head; I also found Robinson irritating in his nonstop upbeat attitude.

If you're looking for a well-acted family drama set in the south, stick to the likes of "My Dog Skip".

Out of the Darkness (1985/I) (TV)

Better-than-usual TV-movie with minor flaws (spoilers), 7 December 2002
8/10

**** This comment may contain spoilers ****

Martin Sheen added to his wardrobe of sensitive tough guys with his 1985 role as fictional Eddie Ziggo (pronounced with a long 'i') based on the actual detectives who broke NYC's notorious Son of Sam case in the late 70's. He's a devoted family man with two teenagers and a loving wife played by the much-missed Jennifer Salt (it is her career that has passed on, not she) and a father-confessor in a priest played by Hector Elizondo.

I had a feeling that this cop with 23 years on the force was just a bit too clean & sympathetic; despite the pressure he's under to solve this case, he only blows up once--for good reason--against a seemingly-inept doctor. Like Spike Lee's "The Summer of Sam", the focus is less on the creepy killer (a letter-perfect Trebor) than on the society he altered over a two-year span of vicious killings of young people. Sheen's scenes with his family are as genuine as the Woody Allen family doppelgangers in his classic, "Radio Days". There's even a cute cameo by Sheen's son Charlie that you'll miss if you blink.

Valdez Is Coming (1971)

"Topflight cast in offbeat western tale*", 23 November 2002
7/10

I usually avoid Westerns like the plague, but the pedigree on this film (debut of theater director Sherin, starring Lancaster, Cypher, & Clark and featuring Jordan & Elizondo in their first movie roles) kept me interested til the, well, offbeat ending. Beautiful location scenery and smart writing helps this story of a Mexican sheriff (Lancaster) betrayed

and humiliated in a most blasphemous way by a vile land baron (Cypher) over the honor of a widowed Apache woman. Clark plays the baron's kindhearted lover who admires the sheriff for his decency and bravery. Jordan is especially smarmy here as a cowardly would-be gunslinger. Because of brief but bloody violence, a few "S" words, and a threatened rape, this film isn't suitable for kids under 14, but it would make a good object lesson in morality for teenagers. A nice companion piece to Henry Fonda in "The Ox-Bow Incident".



Lindsay Wagner

The Taking of Flight 847: The Uli Derickson Story

(1988) (TV)

Excellent & topical story on terrorism, 23 November 2002
10/10

I remember the real events of this true story back in 1985, one of the earliest terrorist assaults on Americans & our allies on an airplane hijacked by Hezbollah operatives. Eli Danker makes a magnificent villain, an Arab living in Germany who is fluent in the language, opposite the dependable Lindsay Wagner as purser--and bonafide heroine--Uli Derickson, a wife & mother who showed remarkable grace under pressure. The story is edge-of-your-seat with a tough script and good support from a B-grade cast, including Sandy McPeak as Captain Testrake, Steven Eckholdt as the doomed sailor Robert Stethem, and Garrett & Gilfillan as a young mother and an older widow respectively. Danker's Castro is a madman capable of kindness to a pregnant woman then horrible brutality to young Stethem, a Navy welder whose geography coincides with Danker's personal tragedy and ultimate reason for his actions. He and Wagner deserved awards for their performances.



Diana Ross

Lady Sings the Blues (1972)

Diana is great in every scene but..., 17 November 2002
7/10

Superb debut performance by Diana Ross as Billie Holiday is absolutely the only reason to see this dreary biopic. Plays fast and loose with the facts, as anybody who has actually read Holiday's autobiography knows. Shockingly mediocre supporting cast, including an extremely hammy Richard Pryor, helps make this film a real snore between Ross/Holiday's musical numbers and heroin addiction scenes. If you want the real Billie, try PBS' American Masters documentary of a few years back. Ross does not exactly sing like Holiday, only getting a few of her famous vocal nuances in, but they are some of her most passionate performances caught on film. She also doesn't exactly resemble Holiday, who was rather plump early on, but she just so commands the screen...amazing how few films she has ultimately made, though the specter of Dorothy Dandridge looms large.

Legally Blonde (2001)

Really disappointing, 9 November 2002
3/10

I went into this thinking it was the new "Clueless"; by the tenth minute in, I knew I was wrong. What a waste of celluloid. The little doggie (Bruiser the Chihuahua) was adorable and the only reason I kept watching: not a good sign! Reese Witherspoon is simply too plain to play a blonde bombshell, nor does she have any of Alicia Silverstone's

sweetness. The supporting cast was equally bland, only Holland Taylor registering as a witchy law professor. Truly idiotic.

Call this one "Charmless".

Carrie (2002) (TV)

Faithful / Not Faithful, 4 November 2002

To the book that is, and to the original screen treatment of this Stephen King classic--his first full-length novel--as well. Personally, no one will ever top Sissy Spacek, Piper Laurie, Nancy Allen, and Amy Irving as Carrie & Margaret White, Chris Hargison, & Sue Snell respectively. Spacek brought the right mixture of innocence & madness to the role, as did Laurie the twisted sense of faith-based duty. Allen was wonderfully evil and Irving the perfect girl-next-door. The best thing about Irving/Snell's look-alike update in the current film is that she is a pretty black girl, a much-needed injection of color into King's originally all-white story. The special effects are superior to the original as well, altho I wish it was as fleshed-out as King's original vision; more parental units could be on hand than Clarkson's spinsterish Margaret, a tougher & heftier character who would have been much better played by King stalwart Kathy Bates. The boy playing Tommy in the current version is even less charming than Billy Katt's original. The only actor I enjoyed in this new version was Rena Sofer as a lovely Rita DesJardines; she was the only person who seemed real to me, especially in her early scenes with those rotten schoolgirls.

There are a couple of scenes which are total fabrications not in the book. Fellow "Carrie" fans will spot them immediately, including the heroine's fate, which was much more moving in the original. The film simply has one ending too many.



Faye Dunaway

Albino Alligator (1996)

Molasses-slow but worth it (vague spoiler alert), 20 October 2002
7/10

**** This comment may contain spoilers ****

Kevin Spacey assembled a first-rate character cast for his directorial debut in 1996: Faye Dunaway, Matt Dillon, Gary Sinise, etc. He gave them an intelligent script and a film noirish style to work with. Faye plays a Cajun barkeep in a 20's vintage speakeasy in modern-day New Orleans run by M Emmett Walsh. Dillon & Sinise play thieves who hold the bar and its few inhabitants (two men drinking and a young man playing pool) hostage late one cold morning along with their psycho accomplice (played by the versatile William Fichtner) after a shootout with police. It rolls along at a leisurely pace and reminds me of a filmed play, not unlike "The Petrified Forest" but with less ham & almost zero humor. One of the hostages is brutally beaten to death and Dunaway reacts beautifully; the tension-breakers are few and far between. Loads of foul language including the one hilarious moment involving the lead cop (Joe Mantegna) and a nosy reporter, the only time obscenity is really crucial to the plot.

If you like your cops & robbers films stagy and smart, check this one out, but don't expect a lot of action.



Nicole Kidman

Moulin Rouge! (2001)

Story is as old as the hills, but what a production!!, 28 September 2002
8/10

Recipe for success:

Combine equal parts of "The Adventures of Baron Munchausen", Minnelli's "The Pirate", "La Boheme", & director Baz Luhrman's previous hit "Romeo & Juliet". Add a slew of great (and previously not-so-great) love songs primarily from the rock era and sing them as if they were grand opera and Andrew Lloyd Webber Broadway ballads. Get two edge-of-greatness stars like Ewan McGregor & Nicole Kidman for the beautiful, doomed lovers in the leads and a couple of top-flight theatrically-trained character actors (Jim Broadbent & John Leguizamo) in the supporting roles. Make the near-fatal mistake of hiring a third-rate buffoon for the villain who looks like third-rate comic David Spade with a cheesy moustache. Drench with fabulous art direction, gorgeous costumes, and dazzling (not to mention dizzying at times) camera work and editing and voila: "Moulin Rouge!"

Requiem for a Dream (2000)

This needs to be shown in every high school in America, 10 August 2002
9/10

Just edit out the sex scenes (including Marian's ultimate degradation) and mute the dirty words. Keep the vomit, the damage to Harry's arm, and

the horrible downfall of his mother (Ellen Burstyn in the strongest performance of her entire career) intact. Keep the psychotic visions and the depths to which this group of people sink to stay high. Herd the kids into the auditorium and make them watch this.

Sister Mary Explains It All (2001) (TV)

Catharsis of a kind, 21 July 2002

7/10

Based on Christopher Durang's lapsed-Catholic classic, "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All To You", this teleplay took its time to be filmed. The blasphemous nature of the story probably kept it from the silver screen and when it was finally shown on Showtime recently, it was done so with little fanfare. Being non-Catholic myself, very little of it offended me except for some unexpected surprises near the end. I was pleasantly moved by Diane Keaton's strong performance in the title role, one I would never have expected her to play. She teeters between sanity and madness very subtly. We also get to hear her sing again, always a treat.

Laura San Giacomo, Brian BenBen, Jennifer Tilly, & Wallace Langham play a quartet of Sister Mary's bitter former students who show up at the 25th anniversary of her annual Christmas lecture to perform a short pageant San Giacomo's character wrote at age 7 in 1959. San Giacomo proves once again how wasted she is on her silly sitcom "Just Shoot Me", too good an actress not to be playing complex roles such as these.

If you're looking for a good flick to jolt you out of those holiday doldrums which come from too much saccharine fare, a double feature of this followed by Bill Murray's bittersweet "Scrooged" will do the job.

The Deadly Mantis (1957)

A Trash Classic, 18 July 2002

8/10

Okay, so it isn't high-art 50's sci-fi like "The Thing From Another World" or "The Day The Earth Stood Still"...it isn't even "Earth Girls Are Easy", but it's worth watching just for the sheer fun of the exercise. My favorite parts are when the critter roars like a lionasaurus (my own invention) and flies through the air with its little (!) claws together. Best thrill scene is the one with the big blonde (her horror!) at the bus stop. It stars hunky Craig Stevens and William Hopper & the first part plays like a rip-off of "The Thing". Hilarious

at nearly every turn; no wonder Hopper & Stevens spent the rest of their careers on the small screen.

Hairspray (1988)

Timeless teen satire, 16 June 2002

8/10

Easily John Waters' best flick in terms of writing, direction, and mainstream appeal, it still has great little twisted touches like the rat Tracy kicks mid-makeout with her boyfriend, & her witchy rival's inevitable barf scene at the amusement park her bigoted parents (played by rock stars Sonny Bono and Debbie Harry) own. There's a strong undercurrent about race relations in 1962 Baltimore where the story is set, highlighted by Mrs Pingleton (Joanne Havrilla)'s moronic descent into a black neighborhood to 'rescue' her daughter Penny from the arms of her black boyfriend Seaweed & be ridiculed by the residents. This is crosscut with the sheer exhilaration that Tracy & Penny are having dancing with their beaus in a black record shop down the street. Divine is hilarious as both Tracy's mom and the racist owner of the television station which hosts the Corny Collins 'American Bandstand' clone. And the music is fabulous early rock'n'roll, all Brill Building & pre-Motown soul stuff like Lesley Gore & Chubby Checker, with wonderful choreography throughout.

Alive (1993)

An Inspiring True-Life Story, 16 June 2002

8/10

Reader's Digest used to have these rather gripping *Dramas In Real Life* articles in the back of their magazine. School-bus accident at a railroad crossing or the sole survivor of a California plane crash, that sort of thing. The latter story was filmed for TV & starred Blair Brown. It was good but it doesn't hold a candle to 1993's "Alive", directed with gusto by Frank Marshall. Led by Ethan Hawke as Nando Parrado, this is not only a great tale of real-life survival, but one of great religious faith and courage. It's based on Piers Paul Read's bestseller of the same name and digests the day-by-day happenings of these young South American survivors beautifully. Unlike the Mexican exploitation flick "Survive!", nor even the book itself, it does not dwell on the cannibalism which kept these people, mostly men in their early 20's, alive and kicking, in spirit if not physical strength. True to form, most of the 16 survivors (out of an original 45) went on to respectable

and successful lives with wives and children to extend themselves. I really admire Nando Parrado; I think he's one of the great civilian leaders of our generation and Hawke plays him same. Adversity (including a concussion & the deaths of his mother and sister in the crash) does not hold this boy back.

The Gift (2000)

Great performances in fairly predictable Southern Gothic murder mystery, 13 April 2002
9/10

Sam Raimi's first mature film after years as a cult-fav horror director ("Evil Dead") is a fine production with a superb cast of character players in a pretty good story by Billy Bob Thornton. Cate Blanchett, whose gift for mimicry has begun to rival Meryl Streep's, is luminous as the seer Annie who finds herself caught up in a murder mystery. A widow with three young sons, she is both loved and feared by the various citizens of her backwoods Georgia town, chiefly Hilary Swank as a weak, abused wife and Keanu Reeves as her hateful husband. When a tarty rich girl disappears, her worried fiance & her father come to Annie for help and the nightmares she's been having begin to take on meaning. Along for the ride is Giovanni Ribisi, as an outcast friend of Annie and her late husband's; Ribisi is excellent as usual and his beautiful, wounded looks will melt any frozen heart. The denouement of the film is fairly predictable but the character studies, writing, and direction are so beautifully put across you shouldn't care.

Beyond the Prairie, Part 2: The True Story of Laura Ingalls Wilder (2002) (TV)

Everyone needs a good family film once in awhile, 17 March 2002
9/10

This is the sequel to "Beyond The Prairie, The True Story of Laura Ingalls Wilder", the lady who at age 65 began writing the first of 8 books about her childhood in the Dakotas in the 1870's known as the "Little House" books. I grew up watching the tv series based on those books, "Little House on the Prairie", and continue to enjoy the true stories of Wilder in these films about her young adult life. Meredith Monroe's Wilder ages about ten years in this sequel as she & her husband Almanzo and daughter Rose move to Missouri to raise apples. They settled there and eventually built a bigger house. Along the way, Laura's very bright & pretty daughter is bullied by jealous local kids who've

forgotten their roots and Almanzo's health fails, leaving Laura to farm their new land pretty much on her own. She finds help in the form of a widowed farmer who has been through the same kind of misery she had in the first installment of this film (which ought to become a series on CBS, the network where the movies premiered): failed crops and a burnt house.

There are miles of beautiful scenery to be had in this film, unspoiled wilderness most likely created within a computer in regards to an early scene with hundreds of covered wagons. Monroe isn't a great actress but she's likeable and conveys enough strength of Wilder's character to keep you interested.

The Laramie Project (2002)

A good document of an ugly incident, 9 March 2002
9/10

Docudrama by Moises Kaufman consisting of actual court & media transcripts and hundreds of interviews Kaufman and his Tectonic theatre group did with the townspeople of Laramie, WY a year after the murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay freshman at the University of Wyoming. The whole span of human emotion is put on display here, from the taped confession of one of the killers to the anguished (& reluctant) request from Shepard's father for life imprisonment of the killer Aaron McKinney. Interwoven are the interviews: with a homophobic rancher and his wife to the good-hearted bartender who last saw Shepard fully-alive to the sheriff's deputy who cut Matthew free after a young biker stumbled across him on the outskirts of town. Eventually, the deputy came to find out that Shepard was HIV+ and that she had gotten his blood on her bare & cut hands. That kind of revelation and the one about Matt making a direct pass at his eventual killer lessens his saintliness but elevates the fact that this was not mere robbery but a particularly violent hate crime.

Terry Kinney as Shepard's dad, Amy Madigan as the deputy, Janeane Garofalo as a university professor, Steve Buscemi as a mechanic, & Dylan Baker as the hospital administrator are the standouts in this production, but Laura Linney, cast against type as a bigoted deputy's wife, also does a lot with less than five minutes of screen time. Among the lesser-known cast, Clea Duvall's interaction with a sanctimonious minister is pretty devastating, as are the two actors (playing themselves? I don't recognize either) interviewing Tom Bowen (most

famous for playing MaryEllen's doctor husband on 'The Waltons' years ago) as a local priest. Make sure to have the kleenex handy as some of testimony is quite moving, especially Kinney's speech. If only everybody had a dad like Mr Shepard.

Billy Elliot (2000)

Really only works when the kid dances, 2 March 2002

6/10

Pretty standard kitchen-sink drama of a talented boy stuck in a dead-end town with a relentlessly-butch dad whose main profession is striking for his coal miner's union. Tries to be a junior variation on "The Full Monty" with fewer laughs and the genuine pathos of real men out of work. Plays more like "Agnes Brown" with a few aborted tho' quite wonderful dance numbers by Jamie Bell in it. Directed very erratically by Stephen Daldry and edited with a chainsaw. Keep the fast-forward button handy.



Robin Wright

The Pledge (2001)

It'll make you scratch your head but you'll get it eventually,

27 January 2002

9/10

Solid character study of a retired Reno detective (Nicholson) who makes a promise to the mother of a murdered child that he will find her killer. By story's end you'll think about those guys you see in run-down towns who manage to survive half-drunk and with a tale to tell -- if anyone will listen. Three other notable actors (Mirren, Redgrave, & Del Toro) have brief but telling scenes but Wright-Penn glows as a

lower-class single mother who falls for Nicholson's innate goodness. She's a fine, underrated actress who isn't afraid to dress down for a meaty role. The denouement has a kind of brilliance to it and Jack comes out the sort of anti-hero he was as Jake Gittes in "Chinatown" or even the loser in "Blood & Wine", another little-seen classic of his. Much better than the first Penn/Nicholson collaboration, "The Crossing Guard", including a coal-black bit of humor involving a likely suspect.



Ginger Rogers

Stage Door (1937)

Hard to imagine a cast this great today, 19 January 2002
9/10

Kate Hepburn, Ginger Rogers, Ann Miller, Lucille Ball, Eve Arden, Andrea Leeds, even Phyllis Kennedy as the ditzy housekeeper Hattie. Only 1939's "The Women" had an equivalent female cast. Watching a film like this --set in a theatrical boarding-house during the Depression-- once again makes me wonder how Rogers possibly got so fat in later years, she is so fit, sexy, and quick with the zingers. Arden slinks around, acid-tongued as usual, carrying a big white cat on her shoulders, not unlike the fur coat Ginger wears by mid-film. Leeds, who received an Oscar nod for Best Supporting Actress with this role, looks like young Olivia De Havilland and emotes same; I wish there could have been more of her and less of the ever-nauseating Adolphe Menjou as an aging playboy producer. Hepburn is a fireball throughout until tragedy strikes and she smolders beautifully.

Mr. Lucky (1943)

Two beautiful leads with an ironic plot device, 19 January 2002
7/10

Grant and Day were perfectly matched in terms of physical beauty, but Grant comes out the better actor. The irony comes with the fact that in real life, his fellow Brits were quite unhappy with his apparent refusal to fight for his country in WWII. As the title character, a slick gangster in the gambling business, Grant plays a draft dodger who falls in love with stiff yet gutsy relief-worker Day. She reforms him to the point that he uses his shady activities for the good of his fellow citizens instead of his own selfishness. Then Fate steps in in the form of a nasty former "business associate" who Grant recently swindled.

Not a classic picture and since Grant was never an actor on par with Bogie or Spencer Tracy, he has to carry the film pretty much on his own unique charm without a fine female lead like Hepburn or Bergman to bounce off of, but worth catching.



Aidan Quinn

Crusoe (1989)

Lovely to look at but not much else here, 29 December 2001
6/10

If you can't sleep some night, I recommend this flick from 1988 starring pretty Aidan Quinn and the beautiful Seychelle Islands. Very loosely based on "Robinson Crusoe", the story is switched to 1808 America at the

beginning with Quinn as a cocky young slave trader who hires a boat to take him to Africa for more human booty. The ship founders on an idyllic unsettled island in a storm and Crusoe and the ship's dog (with a name out of a 50's sitcom) are the only survivors. Crusoe quickly learns to fend for himself and eventually acquires the companionship on an equally-snotty Friday with whom he experiences several life-affirming moments, all exquisitely shot by major cinematographer/minor director Caleb Deschanel. A snore for most adults, this picture might appeal to youngster bookworms on a rainy day.



Barbara Stanwyck

Christmas in Connecticut (1945)

An annual must-see*, 9 December 2001

8/10

Forget Jimmy Stewart reliving his life and opt for this smart comedy of errors instead. I suppose only institutionalized sexism explains why this flick and Stanwyck's other great Christmas story, "Meet John Doe" aren't revered with the same level of love as...well, you know it's name.

Stanwyck plays a food writer for a McCall's-type rag who has been lying for years to her pompous publisher about the folksy setting for her recipes. She's an ace b.s. artist until the day Morgan's sailor is pulled from the ocean after 18 days afloat & 6 weeks recuperation in a Navy hospital. Released the last year of WWII, the film is dusted with subtle patriotic gestures and holiday nostalgia but never sinks to sentimentality. Stanwyck is sexy and sassy as always and meets her match in the hunky Morgan with whom it's love at first sight. Unfortunately,

she has to play married to Gardiner's prissy architect, who actually has been seeking her hand for years, at his farm in CT, just to fool her boss.

S.Z. Sakall adds a great deal of Hungarian malaprop & double-entendre humor in support as Babs' true source of culinary talent & Una O'Connor is hilarious as Gardiner's obnoxious Irish housekeeper.

Gargoyles (1972) (TV)

A great idea gone sour, 8 December 2001
6/10

One of the dozens of classic, made-for-TV science fiction/horror flicks of the early 70's ("The People", "Bad Ronald", "The Night Stalker", "The Stranger Within"), "Gargoyles" starts out really well then devolves into Saturday afternoon serial silliness from the 40's. I do love the casting of Wilde & Salt as father and daughter instead of the usual May/December lovers and that good early role for Glenn. Stan Winston's gargoyle costumes are brilliant for such a low-budget film. This flick cries out 'remake!' for the big screen, perhaps as a Harrison Ford vehicle with Cameron Diaz as the daughter and Laurence Fishburne as the lead beast.



Jessica Lange

Rich in Love (1993)

A series of great vignettes but not a great movie, 1 December 2001
7/10

In a way, this film reminded me of "Jumping Jack Flash". Remember Whoopi Goldberg at the shredding machine? Whoopi zonked out tranquilizers? Whoopi as Blind Lemon and imitating Mick Jagger? Great moments captured on film for sure but the movie still kind of sucks, right? That's how I

feel about "Rich In Love". A man hears his wife sing for the first time. Post-coital teenagers talk about the nature of love. Albert Finney eats ice cream out of bucket and, in another scene, has a lovely waking moment regarding his absent wife, Jessica Lange. But there's only the whisper of a plot here and you can't wait for it to Get Moving. Only when ex-Go-Gos' Charlotte Caffey's The Graces revs up a great pop song does the picture wake up...and then it's over!

This picture is the equivalent of a lazy summer's day in the deep American South.

Shakespeare in Love (1998)

Perfectly-intertwined fact & fiction, 18 November 2001

9/10

Paltrow is absolutely radiant in her Oscar-winning role as Viola, but Fiennes should have gotten at least a nomination because anytime one or both are on-camera, this picture really soars. The mixing of the facts of Shakespeare's writing and first staging of his greatest love story, "Romeo & Juliet", with the fictional romance of Will & Viola is brilliant. The way the couple quotes lines from the play as they make love to each other is wonderful, culminating in an edge-of-your-seat recreation of key scenes from "R&J". There's a certain amount of predictability here for those of us in the know about the great man's works, but that's a moot point. Imelda Staunton's Nurse and Dame Judi's Queen Elizabeth offer fine support but Tom Wilkinson (the businessman with the money-mad wife in "The Full Monty" & the utterly-bananas Marquess in "Wilde") goes through such a believable transformation from nasty producer to devout theater-supporter, I'm amazed he didn't get more respect from the various awards committees. I can't wait to see this one again!

Steel Magnolias (1989)

The Godmother of modern chick-flicks, 13 November 2001

10/10

Top-flight cast meets top-flight soap opera comedy. This is the performance that put Julia Roberts on the map, the romantic heroine, rebellious daughter, and all-around great Louisiana belle who suffers beautifully from an incurable disease. Unlike Julia, Sally Field was denied an Oscar nod for her role of Robert's strong mom but this remains one of her true signature roles; that graveyard scene still packs an

emotional wallop, from tears to smiles, the latter at the expense of Shirley MacLaine's character's dignity. This is just a wonderful (and eventful) couple of years in the lives of a Southern town, so sit yourself down with a box of tissues handy and enjoy the show.

Lucky Day (1991) (TV)

Real family values., 11 November 2001

8/10

Amy Madigan plays an artist who takes care of her retarded younger sister Allison (Chloe Webb), a job their snooty mother (Olympia Dukakis) gave up long before. Then Allison wins the state lottery and here comes mama, determined to "take over" care of her daughter, much to Madigan's dismay. Fortunately she has Terence Knox as her stalwart boyfriend to keep her on an even keel. Movie plays somewhat like a Martin Ritt film in its realism and location filming versus Hollywood soundstages. All three actresses give tip-top performances. The kind of women's movie Lifetime >should< be making.

While the City Sleeps (1956)

Humor and camp add value to this picture, 10 November 2001

7/10

Little unexpected humor bits, including a surprising amount of sexual innuendo for 1956, make this late-period Lang film worth catching. A generally top-flight cast (Dana Andrews, Sally Forrest, Ida Lupino, Howard Duff, & Vincent Price especially) and some good hard-boiled dialogue help. Rhonda Fleming is beautiful but bland and John Barrymore Jr, looking quite a bit like Sean Penn here, doesn't exactly live up to the family name; their campy performances are outrageously bad. I like the fact that the leading lady (Forrest) is not a classic beauty but is a good character player. Unfortunately, this was one of her last film roles before moving on to stage and tv.

A Good Baby (2000)

Lyrical little country film, 30 October 2001

8/10

A sweet-natured young mountain man with a sad past (Henry Thomas) comes upon an abandoned baby girl in the woods and instantly falls in love with her. The town elders generally support him in keeping the child, though a local temptress (Cara Seymour) thinks little of the new family.

A determined little girl on a long walk and a sinister travelling salesman (David Strathairn at his creepiest) have parallel stories which converge in a fateful way. This is a charming slice-of-life in the Ozarks in the same vein as "Where The Lillies Bloom" & "The Dollmaker". All three were shot on location in those beautiful hills and cover the lives of simple-living -- but not simple-minded -- American folk. A minimum of strong language and brief but pointed violence make this fairly-safe family viewing.



Joan Allen

The Contender (2000)

First-Rate Political Drama, 27 October 2001
10/10

It's not flashy, it's slow at points, but this is how a great political drama should be. I put this in a class with "The Manchurian Candidate" and "All The King's Men". Joan Allen is above reproach as a US Senator chosen to be Vice President by a Democratic President (Jeff Bridges) who seems equal parts Bill Clinton and Harry Truman. Senator Hansen is a former Republican congresswoman, daughter of an Ohio governor, who switched sides for idealism's sake. Her chief opponent in her confirmation hearings is Republican Senator Shelly Grunion (Gary Oldman), a steadfastly unappealing little man whose own wife doesn't support him. Then a bombshell, as far as Grunion's concerned, lands on his desk by way of an ambitious junior congressman (Christian Slater), a Democrat from Delaware, a series of photos of a frat party orgy reputedly featuring Senator Hansen in an explicit pose.

The story is a variation on Clinton's own real-life sexcapades in office and how they became the stuff of national knowledge, despite his leadership and otherwise popularity with voters. It posits "where do you

draw the line" in judging someone fit for public office. Hansen is offered to take the low road Grunion has begun several times, but remains true to her heart & soul. If only more real people would follow her lead...

The Big Chill (1983)

And the point of this exercise is--?, 20 October 2001

6/10

A half-dozen or so of the best new actors in Hollywood at the time (1983) spend an autumn weekend in South Carolina reliving their college years of the late 60's. A few good lines, a sweet young thing (Meg Tilly), and a little officially-sanctioned adultery revitalize their lives, all to the beat of a generically-great song score of 60's pop classics. But it all hasn't aged very well. Even Glenn Close dismissed her Oscar nod for her role as Sarah because she was "crying naked in the shower". The saddest statement of this film is that none of these actors are still stars in movies. Jeff Goldblum, Kevin Kline, & Close occasionally get a juicy supporting role but rarely a lead anymore. It's an okay flick if you've never seen it before but resonance is the least of its charms.

Abandoned and Deceived (1995) (TV)

Good Little Issues Movie, 14 October 2001

7/10

I like Lori Loughlin in this picture, which is quality work with no frills. She plays a tough little divorcee named Gerri Jensen whose dirtbag ex-husband refuses to pay child-support for their two adorable young sons & who has to deal with a petty bureaucrat with issues of his own. Even her former in-laws treat her like trash, only willing to be good to their grandkids. After discovering how little help she's getting from her welfare counselor, Jensen puts an ad in the paper asking other women who've been dealt with unfairly by the man and several show up. They begin a crusade to get their kids what is owed them and put self-centered men in their place. This is the kind of story Barbara Stanwyck might have played with a bit more spunk in the old days, but Loughlin plays it realistically, right down to the "but I don't want to be a martyr" attitude that comes with social crusading. I love the way she runs to the phone to keep her son from hearing the filth she was faced with (and kept a whistle handy to blow into the mouthpiece) on a daily basis from disgruntled deadbeat dads. A good one to rent out on

Mother's Day.

Meet the Parents (2000)

Better Yet, Don't, 14 October 2001

3/10

Another one of those dreary "nightmare" comedies Hollywood dishes out virtually every year, usually with a mob theme like "The Freshman" with Matthew Broderick and the wretched Marlon Brando, who really needs to retire. This time it's the once-great DeNiro as an ex-CIA agent doing his best to humiliate and destroy his daughter (Teri Polo)'s latest beloved (Ben Stiller). Who comes up with this kind of unpleasant junk? Stiller was also wasted in that other dreadful pop-culture hit, "There's Something About Mary", which also featured a pretty blonde leading lady (Cameron Diaz), though Polo's Pam seems a bit more on-the-ball about things.



DeDee Pfeiffer

The Sky Is Falling (2000)

This Pfeiffer's a Different Kind of Actress, 1 September 2001

8/10

DeDee Pfeiffer is Michelle's sister, but the name and some physical similarities (blonde hair, good bone structure in the face, small bosom) are about all that they have in common. DeDee has her best role to date starring in this little picture as a sad sack on the edge. She keeps fantasizing suicide, standing over her dead body and commenting on the situation like a muse. Emily, her character, is a very nice girl stuck

in this crummy situation at the end of an unnamed year; even her Christmas tree is a puny, miserable affair. Her mom, Mona (Teri Garr), is a rock, as is her best friend (Laura Leighton), but even with their support, Em simply cannot get it together.

Then she begins volunteering (via a goofy setup) with her dog Sam on a terminal ward of a hospital. She meets a couple of elderly people in worse shape than she is and begins to get her spark back. Except for the implied violence of the suicides, this is generally a good family B-picture.



Michelle Pfeiffer

What Lies Beneath (2000)

Disappointing, Considering Cast & Director, 19 August 2001

4/10

Diana Scarwid and James Remar, both fine character actors, add some much-needed fire to this overwrought ghost story starring radiantly beautiful Michelle Pfeiffer and that aging hunk from the Indiana Jones movies. Pfeiffer's performance is good but her talent only really shines through within a sequence wherein she is completely incapacitated. Harrison Ford, on the other hand, is his usual block of wood; the closest his character gets to actually putting any emotion across is petulant envy of his father's fame. I can't help but thinking how much better this flick would have been with Scarwid & Remar in the leads. Robert Zemeckis needs to stick to high-concept kiddie flicks.

A Midwife's Tale (1996)

A Must-See For Students of American History, 5 August 2001
9/10

Martha Ballard was a real American housewife and mother in the early days of our country. She was also a midwife who delivered hundreds of babies into the new world well into her old age. The hearty, rough-hewn character actress Kaulani Lee plays her to perfection, reminiscent of Anne Revere in "The Song of Bernadette". As her journal is played out, we see her children grow and marry, and get into trouble (along with their father) as the country struggles with democracy. Using authentic locales, props, & costumes, the filmmakers deliver a strong sense of the realities in living 200 years ago. This would make a good movie for Mother's Day or the 4th of July paired with "Drums Along the Mohawk" or "The Grapes of Wrath".



Powell and Lombard

My Man Godfrey (1936)

Add An Extra 1 1/2 Stars to that Rating, 29 July 2001

This movie is a classic. It is a solid ten from the moment Bill Powell quells the pixies in Mrs Bullock's head to the intelligent ending. Carole Lombard's Irene Bullock is a silly, spoiled rich kid with a heart and brain that need proper nourishment. William Powell is a man with a secret who becomes her family butler, as well as her teacher & confidante. The fun recent films "Down & Out In Beverly Hills" & "Clueless" owe a lot to this movie. Rent out all three and take notes on how screwball comedy has evolved.

Black Widow Murders: The Blanche Taylor Moore Story

(1993) (TV)

Not a classic but worth seeing on a rainy day., 21 July 2001

6/10

First off there's Montgomery's supporting cast, especially David Clennon as one of her boyfriends, Grace Zabriskie as her best friend, and Bruce McGill as a police detective. Then there's Liz as this real-life cold-blooded killer. Altho she looks pretty good here with her beautiful, long neck and bright eyes, her character is miles away from Samantha on "Bewitched". She seems to have absolutely zero conscience except maybe when she's hanging out with her gal-pal. I know Liz liked playing character roles but I prefer her in flicks like *Second Sight* & *Lizzie Borden*. At least you could sympathize with the latter real-life lady. I'm glad she got to end her career playing Edna Buchanan, not Ms Moore.

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